A WOMAN'S ENCHANTMENT

By William Le Queux

(Continued.)

"Through her you lost the oil concession of course!"

"Yes—and through her—" he sighed. But did not complete his sentence. I noticed that the corners of his mouth hardened at some bitter recollection.

"Well?" I asked.

"Nothing. Nothing, my dear Phil," and he seemed to swallow a lump that had risen in his throat. "Soutzo wanted to get rid of her from Roumania," he said with a strange smile, "and apparently he has succeeded."

At that moment George Cunliffe, a clever up to date journalist I knew, came up in evening clothes, evidently to dine at the hotel, and I rose to chat with him upon a business matter.

Granny, hearing us talk business, strolled discreetly away along the pavement to where stood the outside porter. I noticed he spoke to the man, who replied, touching his cap at the same time. To them all Granny Gough was well known and popular on account of his disbursement of tips.

A few minutes later, when Cunliffe had entered the hotel, we reseated ourselves, and I again referred to the handsome, well dressed woman who had called for Garshore. But he told me plainly that he did not wish to discuss her. Had it not been for her existence the concession would never have been granted to the man who had served him such a shabby trick.

We talked of dainty little Myra. I had to cheer him, but he declared frankly that his future was now hopeless. She believed him to be a rich man. Like many other girls, she admired and loved him because she knew that once his wife, her position and affluence would be assured. She, who lived that quiet, uneventful country life in Yorkshire, had day dreams of travel to America, Japan and India, of gayety in the European capitals, and the love of a man who knew the world so well, and yet who preferred her to all the hundreds of women he had met.

I knew her, and knew too well how entirely devoted she was to him. He, on his part, declared that when she knew the ugly truth concerning him she would at once abandon him. Yet, somehow, I did not believe that. Her love for him was too deep and true.

For a long time after talking of her we sat in silence. He had been contemplating going to her and making a ADD A WOMAN'S ENCHANTMENT. clean breast of it. But from that—at least for the present—I had dissuaded him.

I was thinking over my own love romance, one that was known to myself alone. I had never worn my heart upon my sleeve, but in my thirty-three years of life I had not passed through this world with it unscathed. My own love had, alas! been the cause of all my erratic wanderings. When abroad in my loneliness I longed for London, the whirr of the motor buses and the smell of the Strand. Yet as soon as I returned there fell upon me a crowd of recollections, of bright, happy days not so very long ago—days when I had foolishly believed that happiness with the woman I loved was within my grasp.

Ah! Perfect love combined with peace is a will-o'-the-wisp to most men, and women, to. Those who read this curious chronicle of man's craftiness and women's affection know well how to themselves peace and love have approached so very near that perhaps for a day, for a week, or for a year they have actually gained it, and then, alas! in a single instant it has left them, never to return.

I was no exception to the rule. I had loved and loved well—but had lost. And now I had grown cynical, bitter and world-weary. Such a mood as this had drawn me toward Granny Gough. We had both been equally unfortunate, both cosmopolitan and both men of the world.

We dined together in the grillroom, spent an hour in the Tivoli, that popular music hall in the Strand; had a cigarette in the Devonshire Club, and at eleven he walked with me to the door of Talbot House, in St. Martin's lane, where I lived. I had wished him good-night and grasped his hand when suddenly he said:

"I may have left London by to-morrow morning, Phil."

"Left! Why, you've only just returned. Why are you off so quickly?"

He regarded me with a rather curious look, I thought.

"I may not go, of course," he said. "But if I have gone you won't be surprised."

"Where are you going?"

"That's just what I don't know."

"But look here, Granny," I said. "What's at the back of your mind? Just be open with me. Are you going up to Yorkshire after all?"

He was silent, and I realized that such was his intention.

"Come upstairs and have another drink," I said. "And don't you be a fool. You're not yourself to-night." And, entering, he followed me into the lift, and afterward into my tiny, but rather comfortable, flat, of which, about one month in every twelve, I was tenant. The remainder of the time it was given over to old Mrs. Almond, the rheumatic-racked and bibulous laundress.

When we had ensconced ourselves in easy chairs and I had mixed him a whisky and soda I tried once more to point out the judiciousness of waiting. He listened to me without comment, seated there like a man in a dream. His kindly blue eyes were fixed straight before him at the "Vanity Fair" cartoon on the opposite wall. Since he had encountered that woman, Lydia Popescu, he had somehow become a changed man.

His manner was distinctly mysterious. I, who knew him well in all his moods and was aware of his continuous ups-and-downs consequent upon an adventurer's existence had never witnessed such a change in him.

The iron of misfortune seemed to have entered his soul, and at the same time his whole being seemed stirred by some strong impulse. He had lost all, I reflected. Was it the spirit of revenge?

When he spoke his words were full of biting sarcasm. I went into the kitchen to obtain a fresh siphon of soda water, and while I had gone I heard him pacing up and down my small sitting room.

Then we had a final drink, and at last he rose to go.

"Well, Phil, good-bye, old chap! If I should be gone in the morning I'll wire you an address. I shall probably go to Germany or Austria. It's warm for the south. S'bogom!" And he laughed, for, inguist that he was, he used occasionally the farewell in the Servian tongue.

I saw him into the lift, and, with a final injunction to be of good cheer, waved him good-bye as he descended out of sight.

For half an hour I remained alone, thinking and wondering. Then I switched off the light, and, entering my bedroom, turned in.

Next morning at half-past 9, Mrs. Almond having made my tea and prepared my breakfast, I sat down with the morning paper open before me.

A startling headline struck my eyes, and I read eagerly, with bated breath. A horrible truth was printed there—a truth that was astounding, incredible!

I rose, rushed down into the street, jumped into a cab and drove in frantic haste to the Hotel Cecil.

The valet opened Granny's door with his key.

The bed, I saw, had not been slept in.

"Mr. Gough didn't return last night, sir," exclaimed the man.

With the copy of the newspaper in my pocket I descended the stairs, and went out into the sunny courtyard utterly staggered.

What I had read there was beyond belief!

CHAPTER III.

Reveals Some Amazing Facts.

At the kiosk at the door of the Cecil, I bought several other papers, and, seating myself in the same cane chair in which I had sat with Granny on the previous evening, opened and glanced at them, one after the other.

What I read was practically the same in each—a report evidently supplied by the Central News.

I sat staring into space, utterly dumb-founded. Suddenly I caught sight of the same porter who had spoken to Garshore when the dark-haired woman had called for him. Rising, I went across and said:

"Do you recollect last night a lady, driving up in a cab? She was in an opera cloak. A gentleman joined her and gave you an address to tell the cabman—just about dinner time."

The man thought for a few seconds, then, looking straight at me, said:

"You were sitting here at the time with Mr. Gough, weren't you, sir?"

"Yes—so you know Mr. Gough, eh?"

"Of course, sir. We all know him here, sir," was the man's reply. "What causes me to recollect was that he came to me afterward and asked what address the gentleman had given."

"Did he ask you that?" I gasped.

"Yes, sir—and I told him. The cabman was ordered to drive to 127a Redcliffe Gardens—out at West Brompton."

"Did you notice the gentleman return?"

"Well—I think so, sir. I believe he came in about half-past 11. But I can't say for certain. You see we let perhaps 500 people in and out between 10 and 12."

I thanked him and returning within the hotel inquired of the smart reception clerk if Mr. Ralph Garehore was staying there.

"He was staying here, but he left this morning."

"You haven't any idea where he's gone, I suppose?"

The reception clerk eyed me keenly, and after a moment's hesitation said:

"Well—if you leave a letter it will be sent on to him—providing he's left an address."

That was all the satisfaction I could obtain.

Therefore I returned to the courtyard, and again studied the extraordinary newspaper report.

It read as follows:

"The Central News states that the Metropolitan police are today engaged in endeavoring to unravel what seems to have been a most extraordinary and sensational crime. At half-past 2 this morning a constable on his beat in Redcliffe Gardens, West Brompton, noticed the door of a house slightly ajar. There was no light in the hall, and the house seemed to be in darkness. Suspecting that burglars had visited the place, he entered in order to alarm the inmates. His theory was that the thieves had opened the door with a latchkey, but feared to close it again lest they might awaken some one within.

"In the hall a woman's white feather boa was lying upon the ground, but beyond that there appeared to be nothing unusual. The front room on the ground floor was a well furnished dining room upon the sideboard of which the plate was arranged, and untouched; thus at once negativing the suggestion of theft. The room behind was a large drawing room with bay window overlooking the garden.

"Entering this apartment and turning on his lantern, the constable was startled to see evident signs of a struggle. Chairs were overturned, a small table with bric-a-brac had been smashed, a heavy ornament had been taken from the mantelshelf and hurled across the room, while one of the big plush curtains across the window had been torn down and lay in a heap.

"The constable ran in alarm to the door and blew his whistle. In a few moments two of his companions were upon the scene, and they returned to the room, where, beneath the fallen curtain, and half wrapped up in it, lay the body of a strikingly handsome dark-haired woman of distinctly foreign appearance. She was in a black evening dress, trimmed with silver, but though she was lifeless, there was no external sign of injury."

"The Press Association, in another account, stated: "The police are convinced that the unfortunate lady has been assassinated, and that a frantic struggle must have ensued before the victim fell lifeless. Curiously enough, there was no other occupant of the house, and there are several remarkable features in the case which tend to show that the murder, however it was accomplished, had been very ingeniously planned."

Each journal added a note stating that the report was received on the eve of going to press, therefore no opportunity had been afforded to its representatives to make independent inquiries.

For a few moments I sat reflecting. Could it be possible that this foreign woman, with dark hair, who wore the black evening gown trimmed with silver, now dead, was actually Lydia Popescue!

She and Garshore had driven together to Redcliffe Gardens. That was already established. Garshore had gone—fled from London.

And Granny? Where was he? He had not yet returned!

In a flash, his hatred of the woman recurred to me. I recollected every word he had used, and also his sudden silence concerning her. By her influence over the minister in Bucharest he had lost the petroleum concession and been ruined.

I felt impelled to probe the mystery further. That a terrible tragedy had occurred was certain. But in what degree was either man implicated? Suspicion rested upon both—upon Garshore as friend of the woman and as having been in her company that night, and upon Granny Gough, because of his violent hatred of her. And further, both men had disappeared!

Was the idea in Granny's mind when he had spoken to me of leaving London? His words were, I now remembered, full of gloomy mystery. He might go anywhere, to Germany or Austria, and he had urged me not to wonder if he disappeared. Was not that in itself a very curious circumstance? Did it not look very suspicious, as though he had in his mind some sinister intention?

Suddenly I recollected my old friend George Cunliffe, the man with whom I had spoken there on the previous evening and whose presence had given Granny an opportunity of ascertaining Lydia Popescu's address.

But was the dead woman really the handsome Roumanian? I had not yet established that fact.

My first meeting with Cunliffe had been in St. Petersburg six years ago. We were staying together at the Hotel de France. At that time he was acting as special correspondent of the Morning Post, describing the marriage of one of the grand dukes. But since then he had been attached to several journals in succession. He lived in chambers in Dane's Inn, opposite St. Clement Dane's Church in the Strand, and beneath the shadow of the law courts. Therefore I resolved to go and call upon him. Mysteries of crime were his specialty in journalism. He was well known to many of the chiefs

of New Scotland Yard, and often assisted them with confidential information, which, in the exercise of his profession, he sometimes was able to obtain. Knowing this, I expected that this latest mystery would attract him. If so, I would join forces with him, and we would no doubt be able materially to assist the criminal investigation department in their investigations.

From the very outset I saw that this was no vulgar murder, but the result of some very cleverly planned attack, in which the unfortunate woman had lost her life. Cunliffe, who for years had been engaged as an up-to-date journalist in the investigation of crime, would certainly have a theory.

When I knocked at the door of his chambers, he opened it, and greeted me merrily. He was a youngish-looking, dark-haired man in a gray flannel suit, keen-eyed, active, with rather aquiline features and a small dark mustache. The latter had an upward trend, and he wore gold pince-nez.

"Hello, Ralston!" he cried. "Well, this is a pleasant surprise! I thought it was a boy over for copy. I'm on a big case, and very busy. But come in a moment, my dear fellow—not too busy to smoke a cigarette with you."

And I followed him into his rather untidy and somewhat dingy bachelor's room, the big window of which looked out upon the narrow-paved courtyard of the inn.

"What's the case you're on?" I asked eagerly, as I took the cigarette he offered me.

"Why, that curious affair down in Redcliffe Gardens. You saw it in the papers this morning, I suppose? My editor 'phoned me at half-past 5 this morning, and I've been on it ever since. Makes a good story—rattling good story!"

"Then you've solved the mystery, eh?" I asked.

"Solved the mystery!" he echoed. "I only wish I had, my dear Phil. No! It's a mystery—a first class mystery! When the boy's been here I'm going down there again. They're entirely puzzled at Scotland Yard. The council of seven are meeting at noon, and they'll no doubt decide upon some theory. Heaven and earth will be moved to discover the assassin."

"Has the woman been identified?" I inquired.

"No. There's where we're all at sea. She's a foreigner. Probably only been in England a few days. Looks like a Spanish or Italian woman.'

"Is her body still in the house?"

"Yes. Chief Inspector Daniels from Scotland Yard and I arrived at the house at the same moment. You know that owing to the information I furnished about the great Russell street mystery I'm persona grata at the yard."

"Yes, I know," I said looking at the thin, alert figure in the gold-rimmed glasses. He had walked to his writing table and was gathering up some loose sheets of manuscript, the headings of which I noticed were "Redcliffe Gardens Mystery: Latest Details: Who is the Dead Woman?"

"I wonder if I might also come down with you?" I ventured to ask. "If you'll let me, I won't be troublesome, I promise. I want so much to see how you pressmen 'work up a story,' as you term it."

"Oh! by all means, my dear fellow. After the meeting at Scotland Yard there'll be two or three of the best men down to go over the house and investigate. At present the search has only been a cursory one. In crime of this kind the place is left as it is until seen by one or other of the great experts. They don't allow the local sergeants of the C. I. D. to meddle and bungle, I can tell you. Our police methods are very often criticised by a certain section of the public, but the people who condemn them are the ignorant. I tell you that in the whole world there isn't a straighter, more honest or more intelligent body of men than the metropolitan police; and I fancy I know."

At that moment there came another knock at the door, and a sharp lad was admitted, saying:

"Come for copy, sir."

Cunliffe stuffed his manuscript into an envelope, and addressing it, gave it to him, saying:

"Tell Mr. Matthews that if he don't get anything before 3, he shall have another story for the 'special.' I'll 'phone, in any case, at 3."

And the boy put on his cap and disappeared.

CHAPTER IV.

Concerns the Fair Foreigner.

As we went along the Brompton road in a hansom I turned to Cunliffe, asking:

"Is the house in Redcliffe Gardens number 127A?"

"Yes," he answered, turning quickly to me. "How did you know? The exact number of the house isn't in the papers yet?"

I saw that I had unwittingly betrayed myself. Next moment, however, succeeded in recovering myself, and said, even though it were an untruth:

"I saw it in one of the papers this morning."

"Which paper?"

"I forget for the moment." And then I turned the conversation quickly into another channel, although I was eager to know all that had been discovered.

At last I asked:

"What's your theory regarding this affair? What has been found?"

"I have no theory at present. Neither have the police," was his prompt response. "All that's been found is the poor unfortunate woman wrapped up in the curtain, which seems to have been torn down for the purpose. The curious feature of the case is that as far as the cursory examination made by the police divisional surgeon has shown, there is no mark on the body to indicate the cause of death."

"That's peculiar," I remarked.

"Very," he declared. "It shows that the crime is no ordinary one. Whoever did it took certain precautions against detection which are unusual."

"How unusual?"

"Be patient. You may learn presently. This peep behind the scenes of journalism will probably interest you."

"Of course it does," I declared. "I've longed for years to go out with you when you've been writing up a mystery."

And I told the truth. Ever since our first meeting in Petersburg I had kept up a close friendshipwith George. He was a good fellow—a trifle conceited,

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